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**Title:** "We are Still stuck in a Factory" : Social and Political Resistance to Changes in Education

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## **"We are Still stuck in a Factory": Social and Political Resistance to Changes in Education**

### **Abstract**

The changed dynamics of everyday life make it impossible for the present and future generations to replicate their parents' life patterns in the new social, political and economic contexts. This is why the state sets new challenges and responds with innovations for the education system. The system "produces" people according to society's trends of development. "It is the school which, in times of unprecedented transformation, prepares to make necessary social changes and innovations (or at least it should do so). It is the school which prepares the next generation to participate in the social system by bringing up citizens for the state and training qualified employees for the economic system" (Sawisz 1989, p. 122, 5). Does the present education system offer sufficient opportunities for future citizens and employees to acquire the knowledge necessary for existing in a dynamically changing society? According to Alvin Toffler, it does not.

**Key words:** *sociology of education, education system reform, education, social resistance, social communication, knowledge society, man of knowledge.*

The development of contemporary society is characterized by dynamic social, political and economic changes. We live in the time of transformation and turbulent activity in which the future is being created. Contemporary systems of values, norms, beliefs, social and economic structures, as well as political ideas indicate that societies have taken a new direction of development in the face of radical changes (Drucker 1999, p. 10). A sign of our times is that both a sense of being and grasp of reality seem lost. "Paradoxically, in the age of access to various sources of information, a flood of news from the mass-media, availability of experts in all

areas, significant or not, as well as a common education, people have a deeper and deeper feeling of being lost" (Dołęga 1999, p. 58). Each new generation faces a new reality, lives in a different world, which takes the form of prefigurative culture<sup>1</sup> (Mead 1978), the third wave, future shock (Toffler 1974, 1986), or the process of globalization – a new world disorder (Bauman 2000, p. 71).

"Parents do not know how to teach their children, who are so different from them when they were their age, and most children are not able to learn from parents and the elderly, to whom they will never be similar" (Mead 1978, pp. 122–123, 130). Different education backgrounds and the contrasting life experience of the two generations create two different worlds. New realities enforce changes at various levels. "It seemed that conversion from uncertainty (the transformation of the post-communist system) to certainty (a well-established democratic and liberal system), from ambivalence to transparency is only a matter of time. However, it appeared that the awareness that the loss of uncertainty is as uncertain as the uncertainty itself, is something completely different" (Bauman 1995, p. 268). Changing dynamics of everyday life makes it impossible to apply the parents' life model to the life of the present and future generations facing new social, political and economic realities. "We have to create new patterns for adults (parents), who should teach children not what, but how, to learn" (Mead 1978, p. 141), so that they can bravely discover the unknown future on their own.

In the past, authorized representatives of the state very often set education goals on the basis of economic needs. A. Sawisz in her book *Szkoła a system społeczny* [*School and the social system*] provides many examples of education reforms, conducted in many countries at various times in history, when the "school" as an element of the social system was "adjusted" to the needs of the social, economic, political and cultural system. In industrial societies, the factory created a new type of an employee as well as served as a new education model. Almost at all times, education has responded to the need for new inventions and technologies. This is why, the state sets new goals for the education system. It has to react to innovations. The education system "produces" people according to the trends in the social development. "It is the school which, at times of unprecedented transformation, prepares to make necessary social changes and innovations (or at least it should do so). It is the school which prepares the next generation to participate in the social system by bringing up citizens for the state and training qualified employees

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<sup>1</sup> Prefigurative culture is characteristic of post-industrial society (or a society about to enter this stage); in prefigurative culture *older generations will be forced not only to acknowledge independence of the young but also to learn from them to a significant extent, new attitudes and ways of behaving, which are imposed by the accelerated rhythm of social life.*

for the economic system” (Sawisz 1989, p. 122, 5). “Implementation of this goal may seem closest to the traditional definition of the education process, namely acquiring knowledge and imparting information. Yet, the main difference lies in the functional compliance of knowledge and information with current technical demands of civilization” – writes L. Witkowski. “Even if students master and retain knowledge, which the school checks, if that knowledge does not conform to the industrial ethos of civilization, it may bring a sense of inferiority, a sentence of spiritual harm and developmental retardation and make school itself a strange, retarded creation” (Witkowski 1991, p. 134).

Dynamic changes in one social system require immediate response from the other. Contemporary changes in the economy have to result in adaptations in the education system and its adjustment to liberal conditions (Bielska, Radziewicz-Winnicki, Roter 2005, pp. 52–65). The education system must adapt to new techniques and technology. Politicians are responsible for this adaptation, since it is their role to regulate the education system, *i.e.* present a vision of the future of education, ensure stability of the education system and its capacity for reform, as well as guarantee its cohesion by setting priorities (UNESCO report, 1998, p. 163).

Your fate depends on your education<sup>2</sup> (Pilch 2001, p. 75). Education and upbringing are decisive factors in preparing the young generation to face the challenges of the future. The size of these challenges will necessitate drastic reforms of education systems (Szymański 2000, p. 1). A state and its political system have to guarantee the acquisition of knowledge needed in a dynamically changing society. Politicians are, and will be, responsible for preparing future generations to live in the modern world “not only in the sense of physical existence, but also (and most of all) they will be responsible for the next generation’s comfort and living standards” (Andrzejewski 1999, pp. XIII–XIV).

At each stage of education, the reformed school should equip a person with a civilized competence and identity, appropriate for post-industrial reality (Radziewicz-Winnicki 2001, p. 32). “Responsibility for future generations, in a world where human and political intervention is shaping the future life of human race [...] is an obligation which we cannot reject”. (Bimbacher 1999, p. 254). The man of knowledge (Znaniecki 1937, 1965) and the knowledge society (Drucker 1999) are the only way to the future. State policy guarantees the implementation of this uncontested goal by means of its educational goals and their accomplish-

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<sup>2</sup> Tadeusz Pilch considers education to be one of the most certain mechanisms for rising above social marginalization (or avoiding it).

ment. As politicians themselves emphasize, a starting point for education change is the awareness that the future development of the Poles will be determined by the level of their education and Poland's place in the world will be decided by the level of the school system in our country (Kwieciński 2000, pp. 345–352)<sup>3</sup>. Today, education is about preparing children, young people, but also adults to "actively participate in changes, which are frequently surprising and of uncertain direction" (Radziewicz-Winnicki 1999, p. 22).

As many sociologists and education specialists emphasize "it is not possible to have a chance to transform Poland without profoundly and radically changed public education of children, young people and adults. This transformation requires social approval from the majority and not, as previously, from a minority in the form of the central authorities acting alone. It requires [...] competence in social communication to establish consensus about collective purposes (e.g. education). [...]. A society of contractual agreement [...] is a society of well-educated people, who learn and who are cooperative and open to change and otherness". (Kwieciński 1998, p. 13).

Taking the volume and scale of present-day threats to the future well-being into consideration, the present attempts to adjust education systems to the needs of civilization, according to J. Materne, are insufficient. Unsatisfactory activity of states to defend against threats to contemporary civilization results from various reasons. Mainly, it seems to stem from a lack of awareness on the part of the majority of people. The knowledge of the significant majority of people about these problems is either very shallow or does not exist at all.

In general, people base their behaviour and way of thinking on family values and standards, important for a local community. However, they have not learned this manner of thinking in reference to continental and global society i.e. trans-boundary problems. Similar stereotypical ways of thinking characterize politicians, social workers, educators and specialists in socialisation. Families, wrestling for existence and struggling with their own problems, usually do not have enough power to acquire widely-understood cultural assimilation. Therefore, in their closest environment, children and the youth do not get a proper chance to develop the awareness of contemporary threats, sensitivity to these risks, personal motivation and social skills to fight with them. The state school, in its present form, is inert in the face of the most urgent needs of modernity; it fails to produce appropriate results in line with expectations. In its present shape, the entire system of educa-

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<sup>3</sup> This is what was said by the Prime Minister, Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz, in October 1996 – Assumptions about long-term state education policy.

tion and upbringing itself constitutes a contemporary problem (Materne 1991, pp. 123–129).

It is commonly said that education system reforms parallel economic programmes. Therefore, each education policy, implemented by education officers “which does not take into account various future scenarios and their sociological interpretations, brings a risk (which should be avoided) of creating past-oriented schools, while we rush into the future” (Meighan 1993, pp. 445,446).

At present, we are experiencing the birth of a new type of society, in which industrial production no longer plays the main role. The monopoly of the industrial era is over and we are entering a completely new phase of development. Knowledge-based economy is the most commonly used term (Giddens 2004, pp. 398–400). It is the type of economy in which growth and development depends on ideas, information and knowledge of a different kind.

As Ch. Leadbeater noticed “Most of us make money on nothing: we do not produce anything which can be weighed, touched and measured. Our products do not fill port storehouses, are not transported to warehouses or carried in goods wagons. Most of us make money by providing services, issuing opinions, giving information and preparing analyses, whether we work in call centres, solicitors’ offices, a ministry or a laboratory. We all make something out of nothing.”

Alvin Toffler, American writer, sociologist and futurologist, famous and appreciated all over the world, claims that we are “still stuck in a factory”. In an interview, given to “Wprost” at the beginning of 2009 (Wprost, 2009), he tries to convince the reader that we are actually “at the beginning of the third wave”. The entire history of the Silicon Valley encompasses only several dozen years. There are numerous people who make use of advanced technologies, but the gap between individual countries as far as technological development is concerned is huge.

Nowadays, the social transformation and reorganization of institutions are most difficult challenges. The majority of the world is still organized on the basis of the rules of the industrial or even the agrarian era. Some countries may not even be included in either of these categories.

According to Toffler, the education system is a measure of changes. “If we still teach children as if we wanted to adjust them to work in a factory – by assigning them tasks, in which they only learn to copy things, and expect them to imitate what other people do – we cannot expect positive results. We act on the basis of programmes which we created in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when business wanted to industrialize people from the very childhood. That is when schools were created that were copies of factories”.



The problematic situation we encounter in many countries is that there are two or more waves of change and neither of them is dominant. There are societies in which the number of people employed in agriculture and industry is still high, while the services, information and modern technology sectors are simultaneously in the process of development. It is, thus, very difficult to observe the sense of changes and conflicts. Waves and currents clash confusingly and whirl around local areas of stillness. At present, the clash of the second and third waves results in social tension, dangerous conflicts, surprising new political attitudes, which demolish old distinctions of social class, race, sex and politics. Traditional political dictionaries have become useless; it is very difficult to differentiate between the supporters of progress and reactionaries, between friends and enemies. Old polarizations and previous coalitions have disappeared.

This chaos in political life is reflected in the disintegration of human personality. Because of the collision of these waves of change, we can observe that different currents cross and clash in the area of work, family life, sexual attitudes and individual morality. The conflict between the second and third wave forces determines the most significant political tension in contemporary communities. We have adherents to the industrial past on the one hand, and on the other more and more numerous supporters of the thesis that the most urgent problems cannot be solved within the framework of an industrial order.

The picture of the new world order in Toffler's categories helps us to understand the social processes and political activities in our Polish reality. While analyzing changes in the education system reforms started in the 1990s, we may observe opposition and resistance to the proposed innovations. Common defiance against the changes appeared both between citizens vs. politicians as well as among coalition and opposition politicians themselves.

Polish democracy is characterised by the lack of citizens' involvement in solving problems which concern them and by a lack of trust in politicians. Therefore, the citizens frequently express their objections towards what is proposed, and towards slowly implemented changes. According to H. Świda-Ziemba, political problems constitute an important focus for openly revealed social attitudes. Mentality, shaped in the communist system, is central to the analysis of the attitudes observed. For many years, citizens did not participate in social activities that could have influenced reality (Świda-Ziemba 1994, pp. 39–49). As a result, even today we can notice a lack of belief that social activity can change reality. Citizens habitually express their objections and resistance to the political decision and proposed changes in the education system. This results from stereotypical thinking, which still exists, that the state does not do anything for the public good but only cares

for private benefits. Such a behaviour is social resistance, understood as “the anger which appears when people are under pressure” and as “civil disagreement to the ideas of the people in power”. Citizens do not have any sense of influence; they perceive most decisions as being imposed on them and this generates resistance to what is seen as often inconsiderate and unjustified results.

On the other hand, according to A. Radziewicz-Winnicki, the civilization incompetence, people responsible for innovations and the institutionalization of education, become a barrier to change. In Poland it is expressed in the political culture by passivity, a disregard for the public good and a lack of interest in social and public matters (Radziewicz-Winnicki 1997, pp. 82–83, 1998). Politicians are aware of the need to implement change, however, quite often governing is less important than using politics to acquire and retain power. Indolence, holding off and postponing decisions by politicians often result from the fear of losing public support *i.e.* people’s votes in elections. While observing politicians, we often witness a struggle between conformists who protect social interest, and progressives who protest against the lack of progress and reforms. The progressives are characterised as egoists, who aim at implementing their own plans (Sunstein 2006, pp. 14–15).

Analysis of social opinions about changes in education suggests that the majority of citizens is afraid of change, objects to reforms or is just confused as far as the proposed modifications are concerned. In 1999 (CBOS, 1999) the majority (71%) was aware of the need to implement changes in the education system. However, only one in four respondents considered change in the education system as urgent (24%), and more than one eighth thought it unnecessary. One fifth of the adult Poles (20%) declared that they did not know what the reform, planned by the Ministry of Education, was about, and the majority (64%) claimed that they had heard about the reform but were not really sure what changes would be implemented. The majority of the respondents (75%) did not support the idea of lowering the starting-age of children entering formal school education. Only one in five respondents (20%) backed the concept of imposing compulsory school on six-year-olds.

Ten years have passed and, in fact, social opinions on education system reforms have not changed (CBOS, 2008). The level of the respondents’ knowledge about changes in education planned by the Ministry of Education is relatively low. The majority of the respondents (41%) have heard about modifications of the education system, but they do not know the details. Only 11% of all the respondents have knowledge about the planned changes and as many as one third of the Poles (33%) do not know anything about the reform and do not express any interest in this issue. The following changes arouse mixed feelings: lowering of the age



of the children who start school education and imposing an obligation to attend compulsory pre-school on the five-year-olds. Parents, 50% of the respondents, do not agree to lowering the age of pre-school education, and 40% express their consent, but on condition that it will have to be spread in time and fulfil various other conditions. These changes were already planned within the framework of the reform, implemented at the end of the 1990s. Even though ten years have passed, the proposals have not gained social approval. Politicians, although they make the same declarations, often use the proposed changes and mood of the public in their political games. Sometimes they postpone them, at other times they undertake the challenge.

Indolence, lack of anticipation of changes and political disputes induce anxiety and disorientation, which in turn results in social protests, lack of social approval, and resistance against changes of apparently safe reality. Therefore, we experience a vicious circle of social and political defiance against necessary changes in the education system.

An interesting solution for a still immature democracy may be offered by the rules of democracy, presented by Piotr Sztompka (Sztompka 2007, pp. 355–356):

- First of all, democracy demands communication between citizens: exchange of opinions, defining political views, expressing political support. Trust facilitates communication, acts in favour of interaction and makes relations free and spontaneous.
- Secondly, democracy demands tolerance: acknowledgement of differences, accepting a variety of opinions, lifestyles, tastes and preferences.
- Thirdly, democracy replaces conflict with compromise and consensus as the main mechanisms of politics and making decisions.
- Fourthly, democracy demands some level of cultural and political disagreement and disputation: focusing on the subject under discussion, avoiding *ad hominem* arguments, showing respect for opponents.
- Fifthly, democracy demands participation: active citizens, ready to be involved in democratic institutions, as well as in social associations and organizations.
- Sixthly, democracy demands well-educated citizens. Efficient participation, even only at the basic level as voters, demands a broad scope of knowledge, information, perceptiveness and evaluation skills.

It seems that the reform of the education system, being a very difficult – if not the most difficult – task, still remains deadlocked. It is caught, on the one hand, between lack of social activity and social involvement in solving problems that concern people and, on the other hand, lack of trust in politicians and social sup-

port. Both politicians and citizens are aware that changes of the education system are necessary if the "system" is to respond to the needs of modernity. Beyond any doubt, implementation of the basic principles of democracy and democratic society will be the way to make politicians act and citizens to become more involved in their own issues. It seems that in the reality of Poland after 1989, the conviction that democracy equals mainly rights and privileges for people in power and citizens, is quite common. However, everyone seems to forget, that democracy involves also non-negotiable obligations of communication, dialogue, compromise, understanding, bilateral involvement and trust. Beneficial changes of the system of education will be a most important test for the society of the future, which will have to be faced by both politicians and citizens.

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